

It's Closing Time: Territorial Behaviors from Customers in Response to Front Line Employees

Christy Ashley^{a,*}, Stephanie M. Noble^b

^a East Carolina University, College of Business, Department of Marketing and Supply Chain Management, Mail Stop 503, Greenville, NC 27858, United States

^b The University of Tennessee, College of Business Administration, Department of Marketing and Supply Chain Management, 337 Stokely Management Center, Knoxville, TN 37996-0530, United States

Abstract

Retailers can benefit from an increased understanding of how human territoriality affects their relationships with customers. In the context of closing time, we show that issuance of boundary markers, or closing time cues, before the closing time boundary can result in perceptions of territory intrusion and territorial responses from customers. In study 1, we identify six types of cues used by employees to signal to customers the closing time boundary is approaching: productive, personal, audio–visual, withdrawal, hostility, and blocking cues. Three additional studies show these cues affect customers' perceptions of intrusion pressure and their subsequent territorial responses, including: retaliation, abandonment and accession (studies 2–4) and negative word of mouth and temporary abandonment (study 4). Additionally, identification with the store can heighten or dampen the effects of customers' perceptions of encroachment on their territorial responses (studies 3 and 4), depending on the retail context. © 2013 New York University. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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“Closing time – you don't have to go home but you can't stay here.” – Semisonic

Introduction

In 2005, Oprah Winfrey was humiliated when she was denied access to a Hermes store in Paris at closing time while other shoppers were allowed to shop. The event led to what the New York Times described as a “shopping fatwa” on Birkin bags and other Hermes products (Stanley 2005, p. B2). Although the perception that others were allowed to shop turned out to be false, Oprah did not lift the Hermes ban until she received a public apology for the rudeness of the salesperson (Stanley 2005). Oprah's prominence and the suggestion of prejudice garnered media attention for this particular closing time misunderstanding, but it still illustrates how closing time practices can lead to customer retaliation that impacts store profitability.

Closing time serves as a boundary between the retailer's time as a public space and the retailer's time as a private space. Maintaining the boundary allows the retailer to avoid overtime costs and the security risks associated with operating in a more isolated setting. Closing on time also helps employees make a timely transition to their personal lives so they can avoid missing public transportation and paying additional child care costs. However, employee efforts to close the retailer efficiently may lead to behaviors that are inconsistent with the store's service culture.

In preparation for closing, front-line employees (FLEs) that would normally be focused on customer-facing activities are assigned secondary responsibilities to expedite their departure from the retailer (e.g., “side work” in restaurants; restocking shelves and cashing out in stores). Employees that juggle competing, incompatible goals often handle the conflict by sacrificing one goal (serving current customers) to complete the goal that they have the most motivation for (leaving work early), decreasing their job performance (Slocum, Cron, and Brown 2002). In the process, FLEs make the transition from people who encourage customers to shop to people who communicate that they want customers to leave.

Boundary theory is a useful conceptual base to understand customer responses to employee actions near the closing time boundary, the time the store closes, because retail environments

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 865 974 9211; fax: +1 865 974 1932.

E-mail addresses: ashleyc@ecu.edu (C. Ashley), snoble@utk.edu (S.M. Noble).

¹ Tel.: +1 252 328 6099; fax: +1 252 328 4095.

are characterized by shared ownership of the open store domain (Altman and Chemers 1980). Existing studies of boundaries in the marketing literature include the study of employee boundary spanning across different roles within the marketing organization (e.g., Jong, de Ruyter, and Lemmink 2004; Lysonski 1985) and the role of national boundaries in international marketing (Clark 1994). Territorial responses, or customer attempts to gain or regain control of a domain, have also been studied in the context of other boundaries in retail settings. However, existing studies in retail settings are limited in scope to territory conflicts between patrons who are on the same level (horizontal power struggles), with relatively equal rights to claim control of the open domain in question (e.g., arcade game, Werner, Brown, and Damron 1981; table, Shaffer and Sadowski 1975; café seating, Griffiths and Gilly 2012).

In contrast, we investigate interactions between employees and customers (vertical conflicts) before the closing time boundary, the time when the store switches from open to closed. At the closing time boundary, rights to control the domain shift from the customer, who is typically being served by the employee and has rights to shop freely in the open store domain, to the employee, who has the power to close the retail establishment, ending service and access to the domain.

Therefore, employee activities before the closing time boundary are important. When employees begin to prepare the store for closing while the store is open, the customer may believe the employee is trying to take over control of the open store domain. Employee actions can result in perceptions of intrusion pressure, defined as the perception that an individual is being hassled by an unwelcome infringement on his/her territory, that are likely to be different from those characterized by customer-to-customer interactions (where both customers have equal rights to the open store domain).

So, although some of the FLE behaviors near closing time, like cleaning the store for the following day, may not result in the perception that the service has failed, the behaviors may result in the perception that the customer is less welcome, which can trigger other responses. These responses may be affected by customers' feelings of identification with the store, which could yield perceptions that they have more rights to the domain or feel the domain has a higher value. Thus, these customers might be more likely to defend the domain when they feel intrusion pressure. As such, we investigate how customers' identification with a retailer interacts with their perceptions of intrusion pressure to influence territorial responses.

Territorial responses to FLE cues before closing time are an ideal context to begin to study boundary conflicts in the customer/FLE dyad. The outcomes of this type of territory conflict have implications across many retail types and can have a direct impact on a retailer's bottom line because of lost sales, lost customers, and lost employee morale (which may lead to higher employee turnover, increase costs and lower profits). Thus, we contribute to the literature by examining whether customers engage in behaviors that reflect human territoriality in response to employee actions before closing time. We believe it is the first attempt to examine "turf battles" between customers and FLEs.

Our research seeks to answer three research questions that will inform both theory and practice. These include:

1. What are the closing time cues FLEs use to signify a retail domain is shifting from open to closed (study 1)?
2. Do FLE behaviors before closing time trigger customer territorial responses (studies 2–4)?
3. Does identification with the retailer heighten the effect of intrusion pressure on territorial responses from customers (studies 3 and 4)?

To this end, the remainder of the paper is organized as follows. In study 1, we identify cues that FLEs use to signify to a customer that a domain is shifting from open to closed. In study 2 (department store experiment), we examine the effects of FLE cues on perceptions of intrusion pressure and examine the impact of intrusion pressure on customer responses. In study 3 (restaurant survey), we replicate the findings of study 2 and examine how an existing relationship with the firm, captured by identification, affects customer responses to intrusion pressure. In study 4 (store survey), we replicate findings from studies 2 and 3 and extend the possible customer responses to include temporary abandonment and negative word of mouth. Taken together, the results indicate employees' attempts to prepare for closing before the closing time boundary could have dire consequences, including costly retaliatory responses, the dissolution of the relationship with the retailer, or both.

Conceptual development

Background on human territoriality

Territoriality, or the attempt to control space, has been characterized as a fundamental human activity (Ardrey 1966). The result of the activity is often territorial behaviors that personalize or mark a place and communicate "ownership" by an individual or group and result in defense responses when territorial boundaries are crossed (Altman 1975). These boundary crossings, which are sometimes called encroachments, violations or invasions, were characterized as intrusions by Goffman (1971).

Research shows that human territoriality extends beyond domains of actual ownership (Altman 1975). People use common rituals and symbolic fences to carve out territories when they occupy space temporarily (e.g., Griffiths and Gilly 2012; Werner, Brown, and Damron 1981). These rituals and symbolic fences indicate the individual has presumed rights to a particular place. Even though the boundaries may be symbolic, people are sensitive to intrusions which occur when individuals violate these often ambiguous boundaries.

In general, temporary tenancy in public places may lead to ambiguity about when the claim to a territory begins and terminates (Goffman 1971), which may increase the likelihood that actions by others lead to perceptions of intrusion. For example, FLE intrusion, in the context of closing time, occurs when customers perceive FLE closing time activities as an unauthorized claim to the customer's territory. Although perceptions of intrusion are not exclusive to the closing time boundary, it is likely to

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